

10 Preparing Your Partnership to Communicate During a TB Outbreak

This chapter describes each of the phases and some of the key communication planning activities a partnership must perform during a TB outbreak. Your partnership is unique. Therefore, you and your partners must decide how you will go about developing a partnership communications plan that prepares you for outbreak situations. The decision will encompass who within the partnership will lead the communication planning effort, the resources you have available, the number of partners, and the diversity of the group. The steps described in the sections that follow will be coordinated or performed by the person your TB partnership decides will lead the communication planning effort.

Elements of Outbreak Communication Preparation

- Pre-event phase
- Event phase
- Post-event phase

Communication Planning for TB Outbreaks

Emergency risk communication is the attempt by scientists or public health professionals to provide information that allows an individual, stakeholders, or an entire community to make the best possible decisions during an emergency about their well being. Often, this communication must be done within nearly impossible time constraints and requires public acceptance of the imperfect nature of the available choices for action.

In terms of responding to a public health emergency such as a TB outbreak, a comprehensive TB outbreak communication effort can be viewed as having three phases: Pre-event (before the event occurs), event (while the event is occurring), and post-event (after the event has concluded). The first phase, which is in many ways the most important, is described here in detail. The second and third phases and their activities are summarized. Complete information about all of the phases is available in *CDCynergy: Emergency Risk Communication (ERC) Training*, listed under Related Resources at the end of this chapter.

The Pre-Event Phase

The pre-event phase offers your partnership the opportunity to plan. The pre-event phase of a crisis is, in many ways, the most important phase. Each day spent preparing is a priceless investment in successful communication when a crisis hits. Those who have survived a serious TB outbreak know that sorting out major issues of responsibility, authority, and priority is tremendously difficult under serious pressure. A thorough, flexible plan, developed cooperatively with internal and external partners, and fully

endorsed by your TB program’s leadership, will lay the groundwork for effective communication.

All of the planning and most of the work should be done during this phase, including anticipating potential events that your partnership may face. Many events could require intense public information, media, and partner communication responses. Assemble an outbreak communication planning team within your partnership to brainstorm credible event scenarios that your partnership may have to address. Any event that your partnership has to address will require

- Planning for message content development
- Identification of the target audience
- Spokesperson preparation
- Selection of effective delivery methods

Reasonable questions can be anticipated and preliminary answers sought. Initial communication can be drafted with placeholders for details that will be filled in later. Communication chains can be laid out. Spokespersons and resource mechanisms can be identified. Training can be conducted and refinements to plans and messages can be made. Alliances and partnerships can be fostered to ensure experts are speaking with one voice (i.e., delivering a consistent message).

Brainstorming about events your partnership may have to address will help you as you complete the four key activities of the pre-event phase:

- Conducting an outbreak communication needs assessment
- Developing an outbreak communication plan
- Determining the resources needed to carry out the plan
- Preparing your partnership to carry out the plan

Conducting a TB Outbreak Communication Needs Assessment — Things to Keep in Mind

A needs assessment is a checklist of the important steps you must take to be ready should an outbreak of TB occur. Before you know where you need to go and what you need to do, you must first know where you stand with respect to your TB program’s preparedness. A needs assessment will help you identify the “missing pieces” and avoid under or over utilization of resources.

Tips and Strategies

The *TB Outbreak Communication Needs Assessment Checklist* in the Toolkit may help you determine your partnership’s readiness to communicate during a TB outbreak. Once you have completed the needs assessment, review it carefully with other leaders

in your partnership to identify what actions you need to take to be fully prepared. As you review the checklist, ask yourself who might be a resource to help you to achieve each step. This checklist can form the basis of your outbreak communication plan (see **Developing an Outbreak Communication Plan** below) by serving as an outline of what you need to accomplish. When you are finished with it, ask yourself, “Is there anything not on this list for which we should be prepared?”

Why It Is Important

A needs assessment can be a powerful tool to identify where you are not prepared. The *TB Outbreak Communication Needs Assessment Checklist* addresses the essential parts of any outbreak communication plan:

- Planning, research, training, and evaluation
- Message content
- Target audience
- Messenger
- Message delivery method
- Personnel
- Other resources

Developing a TB Outbreak Communication Plan — Things to Keep in Mind

A TB outbreak communication plan documents how your TB program will respond to the communication needs of an outbreak. By having a communication plan, you are creating the “go to” resource for must-have information. An outbreak communication plan should include

- A signed endorsement from your leadership
- Designated partner responsibilities for public information
- Agreements on information release authorities (who releases what/when/how)
- Procedures for information verification and clearance/approval
- Regional and local media contact list (including after-hours news desks)
- Procedures to secure needed resources (e.g., space, equipment, and people) to operate the public information operation
- Procedures to coordinate with the public health agency
- Identified communication channels to the public, stakeholders, partners (e.g., e-mail listservs, broadcast fax, and press releases)
- Designated spokespersons for TB outbreaks
- Messages that have been developed carefully and tested by potential audiences

- TB control program outbreak information
- Draft fact sheets, questions and answers, talking points, and other supplementary materials, which have been tested and cleared, for all credible scenarios
- Partner recommendations reached by consensus
- Evaluation plan to measure the effectiveness of your outbreak communication plan

Tips and Strategies

These tips will help you put your plan together:

Integrate with TB program's outbreak communication plan

An outbreak will involve a number of agencies and departments, and a good plan will reflect that coordination.

Your partnership's outbreak communication plan should be integrated into the overall outbreak response plan for TB control programs at the local, state, or national level. An important benefit to this integration is the opportunity to mobilize shared resources, such as a citywide telephone number to respond to public concerns.

Collect, organize, and update important contact information

Keep media contacts current and organized in order to readily access this information when needed. Media contacts can change, and regularly reviewing and updating this information is important

Update the plan regularly

The single most important responsibility that can be assigned to someone in your partnership is the duty to keep the plan "alive."

Schedule a regular review of the plan; do not wait for so many changes to occur that the plan is useless when you take it off the shelf.

Keep the plan focused and to the point

Longer is not better for your plan. Your plan does not have to spell out every single task to be accomplished. It must be the reference that will keep everyone on track and allow the tasks to be completed with a minimum of scrambling.

Get the plan endorsed

Your TB partnership should know that you have thought through the outbreak communication process, that you have coordinated your response planning, and that they have an important role in the “ownership” of this plan.

Obtain a signed and dated endorsement letter from the directors of the organizations in your partnership. Keep the endorsement letters to a couple of simple paragraphs. Have the letters signed and dated as you update the plan; getting that endorsement will help keep everyone accountable for updating the plan.

Use the plan to “get a seat at the table” for communications

It is important to train the leaders of your partnership. Use the plan to help your partnership’s leaders understand how communication planning and preparation—and successful communication—will help them manage an outbreak more effectively. Emphasize that TB outbreaks provide an excellent opportunity to educate the public about TB. Explaining the benefits of communicator involvement will help them understand a communicator’s role and gain you a “seat at the planning table.”

Why It Is Important

The plan is not intended to be a step-by-step guide; it is the foundation of your work. It should systematically address all of the roles, lines of responsibility, and resources you are sure to need as you provide information to the public and partners during a TB outbreak.

An effective, well-thought-out plan will save you precious time when a crisis hits. If you plan well, you will be able to focus on the quality, accuracy, and speed of your response instead of who is going to do what.

Emergencies are chaotic enough without the disorganization of a partnership in which members are working without a plan. Lines of communication and relationships with your response partners are built before the crisis, not during the crisis. Too often, the initial confusion and mixed messages that cripple an organization's or partnership's credibility with the public come from a lack of clear definition of roles, responsibilities, and lines of communication.

Determine the Resources Needed to Carry Out the Plan — Things to Keep in Mind

Think through the resources (e.g., space, people, contracts, and equipment and supplies) you will need and ensure that they are available.

Tips and Strategies

Use the list below to review what resources your partnership needs, then make a plan to access those that you do not have.

<i>Space</i>	You may need a place to bring media onsite to one of your TB partnership locations.
<i>People</i>	Trained and qualified people are needed to support and carry out the functions of the communication team and to conduct the outbreak investigation. It is especially important for spokespersons to receive media training prior to an outbreak situation.
<i>Equipment and supplies</i>	<p>Equipment to support communication to media and partners must exist before the crisis.</p> <p>Determine what you may need to augment your regular day-to-day office equipment and what you may need if a crisis persists. (For example, in the midst of a crisis, you may not be able to wait for a contractor to show up with an extra fax machine.)</p> <p>As you think through the equipment and supplies needed, consider the delivery channels you plan to use and what additional equipment or supplies are needed for specific channels. For example, if you plan to use mailings, you may need to have on hand specific mailing and packaging supplies.</p>

Finally, ask yourself what is not on this list that you should acquire in order to communicate effectively.

Preparing the Partnership to Carry Out the Plan — Things to Keep in Mind

Make sure your leadership has had input into the plan and has signed off on it, then develop and implement a strategy for promoting the plan and keeping it alive. Remember, your plan is not a document that goes on the shelf. It must be kept alive and updated. It must be promoted, rehearsed, and revised as circumstances change. When an outbreak occurs, your outbreak communication plan should be the “go to” document to help you and those who depend on you for information.

Tips and Strategies

To prepare your partners

- Involve top leadership and management of related official functions in the plan’s development.
- Determine who needs to understand the plan, and develop and implement a communication/education plan to reach them. Tell your leadership the benefits of involving communicators when decisions are made as well as the risks of not doing so.
- Have your TB program’s leaders provide written endorsement of the plan.
- Set up a formal review procedure for your TB program’s top leadership.
- Make the plan and the endorsement known, internally and with all partners. Ask other managers—especially of key internal and external partners—to provide written endorsements.
- Train your spokespersons.
- Conduct rehearsals as needed.

Why It Is Important

No matter how comprehensive, a plan that is not reviewed and accepted by leadership (and understood by those who will use it) will be useless during an outbreak.

The Event Phase

When an outbreak occurs, the outbreak communication activities during the initial hours—and throughout the remaining life of an event—will significantly affect its outcome.

The event phase of an outbreak is often characterized by uncertainty, rapid rate of change, and intense media interest. Usually, disseminated information and facts are incomplete. It is important to recognize that information coming to you from the media and other organizations may not be accurate. That is why simplicity, credibility, verifiability, and speed count with communication from you to the media.

The event phase has two parts: activities that are critical during the initial hours after an outbreak, and activities that must be conducted during the remaining life of the event.

During the Initial Hours After an Outbreak	During the Remainder of the Outbreak
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Verify the situation by determining the credibility of the information you are receiving.• Conduct notifications.• Assess the level of crisis.• Organize and delegate assignments.• Prepare information for release.• Release information to the public.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Monitor the event for new information.• Monitor the media coverage of the event.• Maintain your communications plan.• Keep media messages focused and to the point.• Adjust your procedures as necessary.

The procedures you will follow during the initial hours after an outbreak should be detailed in the outbreak communication plan that you outlined during the pre-event phase. Your planning efforts from the pre-event phase will be evident as you are able to turn what was a potential crisis into an opportunity.

The Post-Event Phase

The goal of the post-event phase is to improve your TB program's ability and capacity to deal with future outbreaks. You can achieve this goal by providing for the well-being and recovery of those conducting the outbreak investigation, using the opportunity to conduct public education, monitoring messages and events (media, public, partners, and stakeholders), and establishing a new state of readiness in response to outbreaks.

The post-event phase is a time of retrospection and critical assessment for agencies or

organizations responding to an outbreak. During this stage, it is important that your partnership's leadership take the initiative in

- Expressing relief and thanks to all involved
- Settling internal and external concerns about the outbreak
- Addressing potential aftershocks
- Planning for future outbreaks
- Helping key stakeholders (e.g., employees and their families, public, media) move from the crisis situation to resolution and recovery

Research has shown that a community is usually most responsive to risk avoidance and health education immediately after a disaster has occurred. At this point, the risks associated with a crisis are recognized as real, not hypothetical.

As a crisis subsides from its most volatile peak, public inquiries and calls decrease. Moreover, although the questions are fewer in number, they are typically more complex and difficult to answer. The public wants to hear about lessons learned and the steps that will be taken to prevent the situation from recurring. People want to be reassured of their safety, and they are in search of closure. Even your own TB partnership organizations may desire to move quickly back to its routine, day-to-day operations. However, rushing into a business-as-usual mode can hinder not only your partnership's capacity to deal with future outbreaks, but also your colleagues' productivity and the public's trust in the members of your partnership.

Communications objectives for the resolution phase include:

- Improving appropriate public response in future outbreaks through education
- Honestly examining problems and mishaps and then reinforcing what worked in the recovery and response efforts
- Persuading the public to support public policy and resource allocation to the problem
- Promoting the activities and capabilities of the partnership

Related Resources

Risk Communication Websites

- *Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO)*
ASTHO's mission is to formulate and influence sound national public health policy and to assist state health departments in the development and implementation of programs and policies to promote health and prevent disease, including risk communication. Visit their website at www.astho.org.
ASTHO also offered a Web broadcast dealing specifically with risk communication and bioterrorism. More information about the Web broadcast is available at www.astho.org/docs/productions/0306riskcomm.html.
- *Center for Risk Communication*
This website features information dealing with the development and use of advanced communication methods. Visit the site at www.centerforriskcommunication.com.
- *Current Bibliographies in Medicine: Health Risk Communication*
The National Library of Medicine's bibliography listing for health risk communication is available online at www.nlm.nih.gov/pubs/cbm/health_risk_communication.html.

Risk Communication Training

- *CDCynergy: Emergency Risk Communication (ERC) Training*
The CDC offers ERC training appropriate for public health workers and communicators both inside and outside the government. Information about CDCynergy ERC Training, including the curricula and tools, can be found at www.bt.cdc.gov/erc/erc.asp.